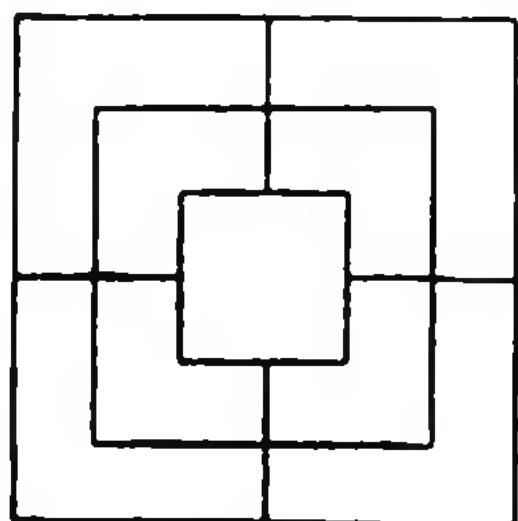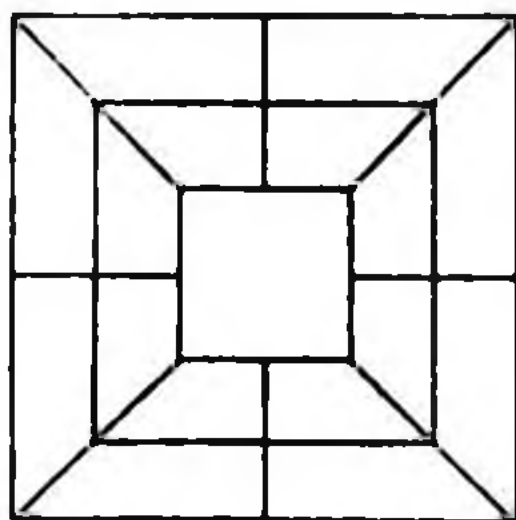# NINE MEN'S MORRIS—MORELLES—MÜHLESPIEL IN PALESTINE
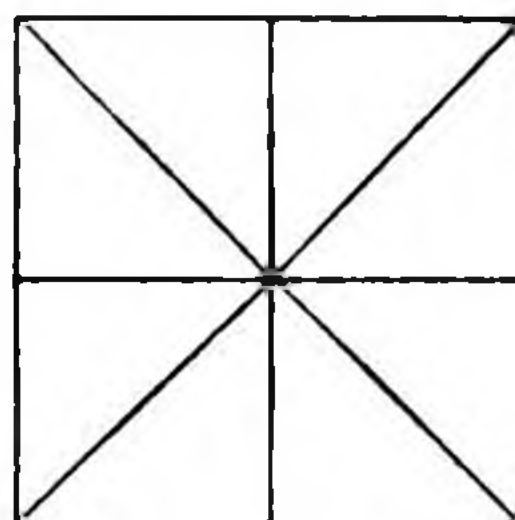
G. E. KIRK

(JERUSALEM)

Fig. 1.

The three gaming-boards, published here for the first time, were found by the Colt Archaeological Expedition of the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem, directed by Mr. H. DUNSCOMBE COLT, at ʿAuja Ḥafir and Khalaṣa in the Southern Desert of Palestine. The history of these two sites is best known in the Byzantine period (5th–7th centuries A. D.), but they also had Hellenistic, Nabataean, and Roman connections.

(1) Found on the surface at ʿAuja Ḥafir. Very roughly punched and chiselled out on a limestone slab. Part of a board of Type 2, 0.19 m. wide.

(2) Found on the surface at Khalaṣa. Neatly scratched on a limestone slab. Part of a board of Type 1, 0.175 m. wide.

The following boards of Type 1 in Palestine have already been published:

(a) Athlīt, the Crusader Castle. Two medieval boards, 0.20 x 0.20 m. and 0.19 x 0.16 m. C. N. JOHNS, *Quarterly of the Department of Antiquities of Palestine*, V (1935), 32 f., Pl. XXV, 1 and 2.

(b) Jerusalem, Ophel. Two boards; the first 0.2 m. square,

scratched on part of a door jamb found in a Byzantine layer, the second on a marble fragment. R. A. S. MACALISTER and J. GARROW DUNCAN, *Palestine Exploration Fund. Annual*, 1923—1925 (London, 1926), 131, pl. XIII, 4; 169, fig. 174.

(c) Tell Jemme. Scratched on a sandstone slab, 0.22 x 0.18 m. FLINDERS PETRIE, *Gerar* (London, 1928), 19, pl. XLII, 7.

The game played on these boards is obviously the old Nine Men's Morris, known in French as Morelles and in German as Mühlespiel. Two players have nine pieces each and play alternately. The game falls into two parts: (1) a piece may be placed on any one of the 24 intersections which is empty, (2) when all the pieces have been so placed, a piece may be moved along any line to the next intersection, if it is empty. Throughout, each player's aim is to get three of his pieces in a straight line, which allows him to take away one of his opponent's pieces. The game ends when one player has only two pieces left. It makes no real difference to the play whether the diagonals are drawn, as in Type 2, or omitted as in Type 1.[1]

The game can still be bought in English Toyshops, but probably few are sold. Mr. Colin Baly tells me that he has seen the diagram on the back of chessboards at Liverpool.

LAMER, in PAULY-WISSOWA, *Real-Encyclopädie*, XIII.2 (1927), Art. "Lusoria Tabula," has collected ancient examples of these boards, both the familiar square kind and a variant consisting of three concentric circles with eight radii, on which exactly the same game could be played. As his remarks are separated in a long and involved article, it is worth while to summarize them here: The boards are quite common on Roman sites (§ 55, b.2, 2006). When they are found in the Eastern Mediterranean, as for example on the steps of the Parthenon, it is probable that they belong to the Roman period (§ 54, 7.c, 1999 f.). LAMER has used an interesting work, *Historia Nerdiludii* (Oxford, 1694), a collection of Oriental games by THOMAS HYDE, sometime Public Professor of Arabic in the University of Oxford, who describes Nine Men's Morris, pp, 202 ff. He says that in medieval Greek it was called τριόδιον, and in 1926 LAMER found it played at Mykonos

---

[1] A. W. GOMME, *Traditional Games of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1894), I. 414 ff.

with the name τπιόδιον (§ 45, 1987 f.). HYDE says that in Meso-
potamia it was called ﺟﺮ, *raiz*, and Arabic commentators on the
Quran used it to explain the words ﻃﺒﻨﺔ and ﺍﻟﻔﺮﻕ. He also gives
the Turkish and Persian names.

LAMER is however wrong when he claims that a game men-
tioned twice by Ovid[2] is Nine Men's, for as HYDE, 212 f., justly
remarks, *minorem ludendi formam respicit*. Ovid's game was played
with only three pieces to a player on a board of Type 3. LAMER
found boards of this kind, but without the diagonals, which do not
affect the play, on the steps of the Basilica Julia at Rome, § 55 b,
2004. HYDE knew this form of the game, which is essentially the
same as the English Noughts and Crosses and older games.

JOHNS, discussing the two boards at Athlit, recognized their con-
nection with Nine Men's Morris, but wished to connect them also
with the modern Arab game *sīja* or *sīga*, for which he referred to
EDWARD W. LANE.[4] But that authority, and also Sir FLINDERS PETRIE,[5]
make it clear that *sīja* is quite a different game. The board has
5×5 or 7×7 or 9×9 squares, and the number of pieces of the
two players together is one less than the number of squares. Each
player aims at trapping one of his opponent's pieces between two
of his own thus, ABA. Piece B is then taken, and replaced by
one of the two A pieces. This may make another ABA arrange-
ment at right angles to to the first, and so a series of "takes" is
possible, as at draughts (jeu de dames, Damenspiel). This cannot
be done at Nine Men's Morris.

(3) (Fig. 2). Found on the surface at Khalasa. Two boards lightly
scratched on a limestone slab, 0.21 × 0.05 m. They are 4 squares wide,
but their length is not certain, for the edges of the stone are chipped.
The rectangle on the right has 21 or more squares in length, but
only 20 can be counted on the other. LANE, *op. cit.*, 353 ff. says
the modern Egyptian game of *tab* is played on a board 4 squares
wide and usually 7, 9, 11, 13, or 15 squares long; each square is

---

[2] e. g. *Ars Amatoria* III 365 f. parua tabella capit ternos utrimque lapillos
in qua uicisse est continuasse suos. (Each player places three pieces on the
little board, and you win if you get your pieces in a line).

[8] cf. S. G. OWEN, *P. Ovidii Nasonis Tristium, Liber II* (Oxford, 1924), 257.

[4] Manners and Customs *of the Modern Egyptians* (Everyman Library), 356.

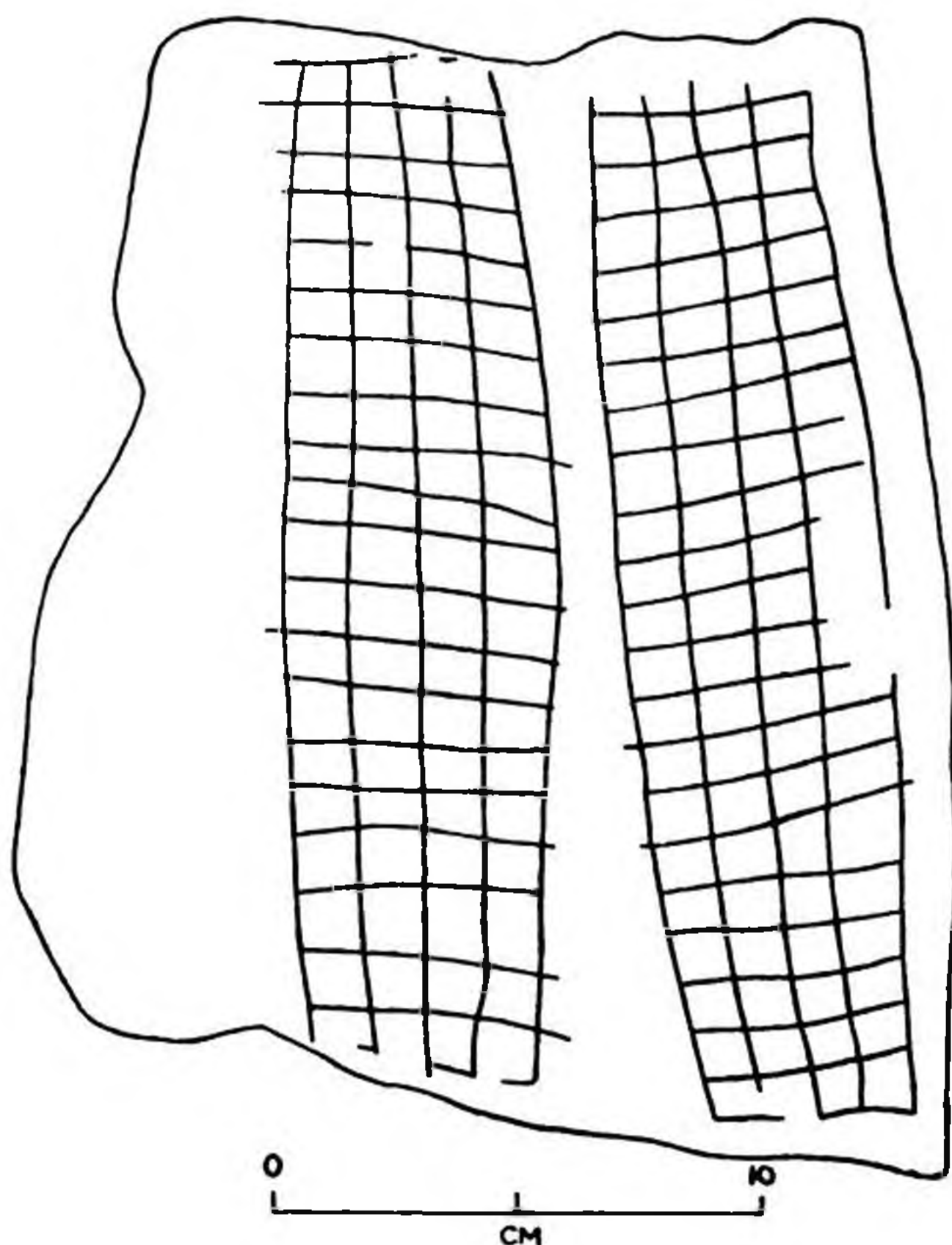[5] *Objects of Daily Use*, (London, 1927), 56, § 109.

Fig. 2.

about 2 ins. (0.05 m.) square. On the other hand HYDE, *op. cit.*,
217 ff. says that in his time the board for *tab* was 13, 19, 21, or
29 squares long, so that our boards might be the right length.
However the smallness of the squares, scarcely more than 0.01 m.,
is a difficulty, for a player may accumulate several of his pieces in
one square, as in backgammon (trictrac, Puffspiel), so that the pieces
used on these boards would have to be very small. Nor is it clear
why there should be two boards on one stone, unless the designer
found that he had no room for his twenty-first square in his first
drawing. I can find no evidence that *tab* was played in Roman
times or earlier, or for another game played on a board 4 squares
wide and 21 or more long.